



Since 1990, 136 armadillos have been reported in Illinois. Is this tropical native a sign of range expansion or coincidental prank? Hitchhiking has been reported.

Armadillo Ody

Story By Joyce Hofmann

Illinois citizens have been seeing a new, and perhaps surprising, animal recently—the nine-banded armadillo (*Dasypus novemcinctus*), a quirky, armor-plated mammal native to the New World tropics.

Armadillos have undergone an amazing range expansion, helped by humans intentionally and inadvertently transporting this species to new places. First documented in the U.S. in 1849 in the Rio Grande Valley of southern Texas, at the beginning of the 20th century armadillos were restricted to Texas, but they have been steadily moving northward and eastward. Escapees from a zoo (1924)

and circus (1936) established a population in Florida that also has spread.

By 1954 the armadillo inhabited southern Oklahoma, Louisiana and southern Arkansas as well as Texas and Florida. By 1995 it was established in most of Oklahoma, southern Kansas, Arkansas, southern Missouri, western Tennessee, Mississippi, much of Alabama and Georgia, and southern South Carolina. Individual armadillos were found as far north as Nebraska.

The species' northward expansion will be limited by the severity of winters because armadillos can't hibernate. In a 1995 study, biologists concluded that armadillos might move into areas with average January temperatures higher than 28 degrees Fahrenheit (although prolonged cold or snow cover would be more dangerous than occasional frigid

days). Their map of the armadillo's potential range includes southern Illinois to 39°N latitude (just north of Alton).

Sporadic occurrences of armadillos have been recorded in Illinois since the 1970s. In 2003, the Illinois Natural History Survey (INHS) conducted a survey (supported by the Illinois Wildlife Preservation Fund) with questionnaires mailed to people knowledgeable about southern Illinois' fauna. Questionnaire recipients were asked if they had observed armadillos in Illinois since 1990 and, if so, when and where. Birders are very observant, so a request for armadillo sightings was posted on IBET, an Illinois birding listserve. The Illinois Department of Transportation was asked for roadkill information and museums were checked for specimens. All records were entered in a database and, whenever possible, the locations were



(Photo courtesy Michael Jeffords.)

Armadillo meat was once an important food in some regions; during the Depression, rural Texans called armadillos “Hoover hogs.” The hides also have been made into baskets or other curios for sale to tourists.

even in the Chicago suburbs, most armadillos were in the western part of southern Illinois (west of the I-57/I-24 corridor and south of about 39°10'N latitude). Jackson and Randolph counties have the highest numbers of reports. Other counties with five or more sightings are Clinton, St. Clair, Union and Massac.


How do armadillos get here? Some presumably were brought into Illinois and intentionally released. These could have been pranks or “pets” that wore out their welcome.

Others are likely to have arrived as hitchhikers on barges coming up the Mississippi, Illinois and Ohio rivers; in railroad cars; or in trucks. Dan Kassembaum

Natural dispersal from Missouri is another possibility. Although armadillos can swim, the Mississippi River is a formidable barrier. Perhaps they travel across bridges. Two roadkilled armadillos have been spotted within a mile of the Jefferson Barracks Bridge (I-255) in Monroe County. Or island-hopping might enable armadillos to cross such a wide river in stages.

If you spot an armadillo in Illinois, send the location, date and status (alive or dead) to jhofmann@inhs.edu.

The big question is whether the nine-banded armadillo has become established in Illinois or there has just been a continual influx of animals that don't survive and breed. Armadillos may be able to form a breeding population in the southern 1/4 or 1/3 of Illinois, especially if the trend of warmer winters continues. Severe winters, however, would cause high mortality and the armadillo's range would likely shrink southward.

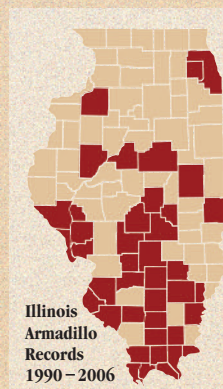
One thing is certain—armadillos aren't just for Texans anymore. 

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Two road-killed armadillos have been spotted within a mile of the Jefferson Barracks Bridge (I-255) in Monroe County.

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(Photo courtesy Michael Jeffords.)



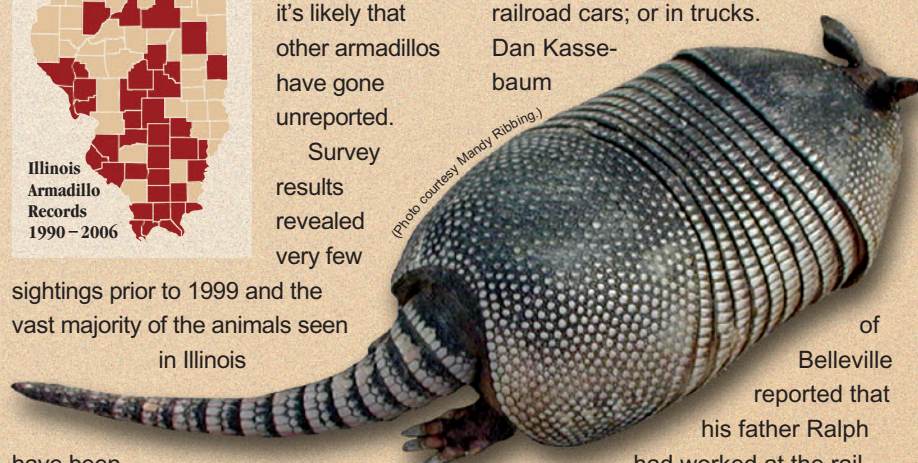
sightings prior to 1999 and the vast majority of the animals seen in Illinois

have been roadkills—from 1990-2006 at least 136 armadillos were reported from 42 counties. Although sightings have occurred

mapped. The INHS continues to collect new sightings, but it's likely that other armadillos have gone unreported.

Survey results revealed very few

(Photo courtesy Mandy Ribbing.)



of Belleville

reported that his father Ralph had worked at the rail yards in East St. Louis and talked of finding armadillos in rail cars that came up from Texas.